

# SKILL INDIA IS AILING

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## Recreating the classic 'mohalle ki Diwali' on Digital?

Remember the fanfare and optimism over the launch of Skill India in July 2015, and the roadmap for skilling 400 million people by 2022 (World Youth Skills day)? Today, Skill India looks like a patient who, after having their treatment diagnosed as successful, has relapsed into a condition worse than before and is on their last leg.

Why this relapse? The fatal flaw the surgeons committed was in forgetting all about education. In all successful countries — Germany, the UK, Japan or even China — skills and education remain closely knitted. We somehow missed the bus in 1977 when 10+2 was introduced by D S Kothari, the then UGC chairman, with vocational education as the central objective in accordance with the recommendations of the Education Commission Report (1964-66). Unfortunately, there were few takers for vocational education, primarily due to deep-rooted social prejudices against working with one's hands as it is considered lowly and demeaning. As a result, over the years, the budgetary provisions for skills in schools dried up and today it exists in a silo as a scheme of the Ministry of Skills and Entrepreneur Development (MSDE). The dream of streaming 50 per cent students into the vocational side never materialised. The challenge now is how to make a U-turn and kick-start it all over again.

An attempt was made in 2010-13 when the two major stakeholders — the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) — buried the hatchet, so to speak, and jointly notified, with the approval of the Union Cabinet, the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF).

NSQF is a framework under which skills are mainstreamed into the education system at the national level. There are several advantages to NSQF, over the modular courses offered by the MSDE. First, it streams students according to their aptitude and capacity into the general or vocational line from Class IX itself. Whereas the certificates and diplomas granted by the MSDE and others are terminal in nature, NSQF can lead a student to a bachelor's degree in vocational education (B.Voc). Second, it seamlessly provides pathways between education, skills and the job market, thereby de-stigmatising vocational education by making it part-and-parcel of the school and university system. General education subjects such as reading, writing, arithmetic and basic science provide the necessary glue. NSQF also recognises prior learning, through which an estimated 20 million school dropouts can get a second chance.

The National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015 also highlights the importance of NSQF and the need for linkages between skills and education. Unfortunately, this has been totally lost in translation. This disconnect is due to the nature of the institutional architecture that has emerged with the MSDE as the centrepiece and a false understanding of its role. MSDE's success as a ministry depends largely on its capacity to work closely with the other 18 ministries, the state governments and the industry partners, who are the real sherpas of Skill India.

It was because of this lack of understanding that the official advertisement and press note released by the MSDE at the launch of Skill India in 2015 made no mention of the MHRD as a partner, though it does in the case of other ministries. This disconnect continues and manifests in such retrograde decisions as the jettisoning of the pilot NSQF project started in Haryana and West Bengal schools in 2013. The National Council on Skill Development headed by the PM

could play a crucial role in ensuring that the true spirit of NSQF is kept in mind by all, especially the coordinating ministry.

Skill India has also been afflicted by insufficient industry partners and the failure to attract genuine skill knowledge providers. At present, with the chase to meet targets, the space has been taken over by fly-by-night operators raising serious ethical issues. The Apprenticeship Act, which has enormous potential, has also failed to enthuse industry. There are no figures available on actual placements but some estimates indicate figures as low as 5 to 10 per cent.

The university system can bring in uniformity throughout the country in terms of enforcing the National Occupation Standards and NSQF. Skill universities have started to spring up in many states, and before it is too late, we need to have an apex body to ensure standardisation across the country. If need be, the government must not hesitate to create a National Skills University which could do the same path-breaking work that IGNOU did in the 1980s for Open and Distance Learning (ODL), which today has grown to become one of the largest ODL systems in the world.

The MSDE is finding it extremely difficult to tackle the mind-boggling target of skilling 400 million (though officially, the claim is 250 million till end 2017). If skills had remained a part of education as envisaged in 1977, it could have ridden piggyback on the wave of massification of higher education that is taking place in the country. The target of achieving 30 per cent GER by 2022, which seemed impossible in 2008 (it was 11 per cent then), is now well on its course to being achieved. The present target would have been less daunting with the MHRD's capital and human resources of more than 900 universities, 6,000 technical institutions, 3,200 polytechnics, 36,000 colleges and 1.55 million schools, compared to the MSDE's 10,000 ITIs.

Are we, then, not barking up the wrong tree? Is the MSDE prepared to play second fiddle to the MHRD in the area of skills now that we have created a new ministry for good? Or is the Ministry of Finance willing to make a much larger allocation to a ministry other than the MSDE in the name of Skill India? Why are we failing to get the cooperation of genuine industry partners on a viable scale?

Having identified the "monster in the mist", we now need to be bold and implement 10+2 in its original spirit, along with NSQF, and not fall into the trap of the petty turf games which ministries and bureaucrats are so prone to playing.

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